The Linguistic Features of Newspapers Headlines

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Abstract

No one can deny the influential role and the potential power the media has in our modern societies. It is the great shaper of public opinion that can affect our world either positively or negatively. Newspapers as a type of media text are considered as a credible and authoritative source of local, national and international information that have immediate concerns for every reader. To draw the readers' attention to their papers and topics, the journalists rely very heavily on the headlines which are in themselves a distinct type of text. The language of headlines or what is termed "headlinese" incorporates several features ;though similar in some respect to standard language, , yet it also shows many differences and peculiarities which may sometimes render the headlines ambiguous and misleading. The present paper pins down the general linguistic features of headlinese aiming at discovering what sort of similarity and difference this language has, to decide its degree of deviation from the standard norms.

المستخلص

ان أهمية الإعلام ودوره البارز في مجتمعاتنا الحديثة حقيقة يعرفها القاصي و الداني . فهو سلاح ذو حدين يمتلك القدرة على توجيه الرأي العام سلبا او إيجابا . فالصحف اليومية ، كنوع من الإعلام المكتوب، يراها قراؤها مصدرا من أكثر مصادر المعلومات ثقة و مصداقية سواء أكانت هذه المعلومات محلية ا و دولية.

وللوصول الى جمهور أوسع ،يعتمد الصحفيون بشكل كبير على العناوين و يولونها قدرا كبيرا من الأهمية . ولهذه العناوين لغة خاصة بها تسمى اصطلاحا ب (الهيدلاينيز – Headlinese)ومع إن هذه اللغة قد تبدي نوعا من التشابه مع اللغة الفصحى الا ان لها من الصفات الخاصة ما يميزها لدرجة قد تجعلها تبدو غامضة ومبهمة في كثير من الأحيان. لذا يحاول البحث الحالي تسليط الضوء على نقاط التشابه والاختلاف بين لغة العناوين واللغة الفصحى ليحدد مقدار انحراف الأولى عن معايير الثانية .

1.Introduction

The newspaper headline is an attention grappling title for newspaper article that can explain the news story in a concise and attractive way. It is "the shop window display of newspaper", as White and Herra(2009:135) have proposed. Headlines are the first signpost that any newspaper reader will stop at and sometimes they are the only one. Headlines are catchy phrases or sentences that open the newspaper's discourse and get the reader's interest by their special form and content(Al-Salmany,2000:14).Or as Fries (1987;cited in Pajunen,2008:8)indicates, headlines are the starting points depending on which the reader can infer some expectations about the topic of the article.

Headlines are special type of text that can outline the reading process and figure out what to read and what to pass by. They have to fulfill numerous functions following certain rules that impede not only the headline writers ,but also their shape and grammar like the layout of the page, the type face and so on(Reah,1998:13).Thus heading is so crucial that almost every newspaper has specialists in heads' writing ,which is indeed, not an easy task (Plotnik,1982:6).

2. The Language of Headlines

Headlinese, as a distinct genre, is hardly used or heard within the course of everyday communication. Like any other type of written genre, it is recognized according to its "typical content and internal organization:, i.e. the way it states the verbal form or style, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:107) have proposed. This definitely entails that headlinese incorporates several features such as: ellipsis, lexical density, intertextuality, ambiguity, and so forth. Features like these not only make it pretty recognizable but also render its comprehension and understanding a little effortful (Carter, 1997:166).

The peculiarities of headlines were pioneered by Straumann (1935; cited Bruthianx,1996:24)) who studies the syntax of headlines and other economy registers like: telegraphs, advertisement and so on (Bruthianx,1996:24) . Straumann terms the language of these registers as "block language", which, as he has pointed out, has its own grammar that though similar in some respect to core grammar, yet deviates considerably from it (Weir, 2009:6). A fact that has been also pointed out by Chesterton in the thirties of the past century, when he wrote:

> *Headlines, are one of the evils produced by that passion for compression and compact information, every-*

body can see how an entirely new system of grammar, syntax and even language has been inverted to fit the brevity of headlines. Such brevity, so far from being the soul of wit, is even the death of meaning and certainly the death of logic.

(Chesterton,1930; quoted in Práśková,2009:3)

As such, understanding, comprehending and analyzing headlines, require an investigation of their most outstanding features. Among them, are the following:

2.1 The Headlines Vocabulary

Special vocabulary is developed to meet the needs of headline writing. Short, attractive, dramatic words as well as those of strong connotations are the hallmark of headline language. They are used to write an economic, attention getting and memorable headlines. Much of these vocabulary only occur with headlines, other may find their way outside it (Reah, 1998:16).

Shams (2002:13) and Swan(2009:212) provide a list of the most common vocabulary in headlinese , it includes:

Headline word	Meaning	Example
Air	To make known	T.V. Airs Facts On Arms Delivery
Axe	Abolish, close, down, abolition	Country Bus Service Axed
Bid	Attempt, offer	Union Rejects Latest Bid
Curb	Limit, control	Sunday Driving Curbs
Fend	Long lasting quarrel or dispute	Family Fend Explodes Into Violence: Six Held
Hold	Arrest, keep under arrest	Man Held After Station Blaze

Headline word	Meaning	Example
In (the) red	In debt, making financial loss	British Steel In Red
Sway	To influence or persuade	President Fails To Sway Union Strike
Trim	To cut	Senate To Trim Budget
Wed	Marry	Bishop To Wed Actress

What is remarkable about the headlines lexical choices is the extensive use of neologism – a newly invented word, or a word or expression that has acquired new meaning. Different procedures can be followed in creating neologism but three only are employed within the newspaper discourse.

First, by affixations, the most famous example here is indexing "gate" to mean "scandal" as in: *Irangate, Watergate, Hansiegate, Camillagate* and the like.

Second, meaning- shift which can be achieved either by changing the grammatical category of the word or by developing a new euphemistic meaning to an existing word. To use "*google*" as a verb is an example to the former and to use "*theatre*" meaning "a battle field" is an example of the latter.

Third, blending two existing words, a technique which is only used in tabloid newspaper not broadsheet ones. For instance, "Aristochavs" used by The Sun (16 March 2006) showing its critical attitude about cloths designer of some British miner celebrities. Aristochavs is a blend of "aristocracy" and "chavs", a neologism similar to the American epithet "white trash" (Richardson, 2007:69).

2.2 Stacked Nouns

Most frequently, headlines are incomplete sentences; they are noun phrases free of any verbs, e.g.

1) ***Holiday Hotel Death***

2)***Exeter Man's Double Marriage Bid***.

Such nominal headlines may contain a sequence of three, four or more nouns. Usually earlier nouns in the sequence modify the later ones:

3) A.Furniture factory pay cut row.

(Swan . 2009:211)

Nominal premodification like this, often takes priority over postmodification in headlines. Since it can articulate meaning with a smaller space than postmodification, as proposed by Shams (2002:10).Evidently, understanding such nominal compound is not an easy task . As a piece of advice, Swan (2009:211) suggests backwards reading to grasp the meaning of these stacked nouns. So , the last example can be:

3.B) *Row (disagreement) about a cut (reduction) in a factory that producing furniture.*

2.3 Ellipsis

As stated previously headlinese as a distinct type of written register , incorporates several features on the top of which is ellipsis ‘to do the trick ‘ . to arise the curiosity of the reader in identifying what is missing and to finalize his interest to the very end of the article .

Ellipsis is a must in witting headlines, since they are spatially restricted. so , by the few short wording , the headlines writers have to deliver the message with most valuable and relevant information that frame the whole story for the readers .

Both form and content of headlines are subject to ellipsis. Content ellipsis is to omit those words and expressions revealing the same ideas and concepts or better the same meaning. Form ellipsis is, what is called structural ellipsis. In a word, structural ellipsis to shed all the grammatical words. i.e. words of low informational value and retain all the lexical ones . It is , doubtlessly , the most noticeable feature of headlines .

Jenkins (1987:349) lists the elements dropped in headlines as follows :

2.3.1 Determiners:

Articles , definite or indefinite , are central to the category of determiners ,They are almost regularity dropped in headline, as proposed by (Cramer , 2011 : 91)

4) <A> ***Disaster as*** <a> ***Hurricane strikes*** <the> ***south coast of*** <the> ***United States***

Jenkins (1987:354) assumes that ellipsis of determiners can give sense of generality to greater extent than the following article can do .

5)<A> ***Wife*** <has > ***Knocks out*** <her> ***Husband***

Jenkins's other point is, ellipsis of determiners is always accompanied by other types of ellipsis ,as shown above.

2.3.2 Auxiliary

Auxiliary ellipsis in headlinese is quite the opposite of that in everyday language. Headlines always keep the main verb and leave the auxiliary, since they are the primary reference to the topic of the news. By contrast, every day communication omits the main verb, but keep the auxiliary in subsequent reference since the main action expressed by the lexical verb is already known. (ibid).

The general tendency in headlines is to omit all auxiliaries:

6) *UK*<is> *breaking law*

The auxiliary is omitted from the present continuous.

7) ***Syria*** <is> ***ready to fight***

It is quite obvious that "is" in example no.7 is the main verb, yet it has also been omitted.

Auxiliary's omission also associated with passive constructions:

8) <The> ***Peace Treaty*** <has been > ***Approved***

9) <The> ***Isle of Man*** <is> ***sealed of as*** <the> ***police hunt*** < the > ***Killer of*** <the > ***teenager***

2.3.3Copula

"Be" is the main copula in English with the most neutral meaning. The other copulas can be divided into three major types : verb of seeming verb of remaining and the resulting verbs . Each member in the past groups has its own distinct meaning (Quirk et at, 1985: 1174) Copulas are generally absent in headlines:

10) <the> ***Gulf Coas***t <is> ***in Ruins***

The copula *is* in the above headlines has the meaning of 'become' .In spite of its absence, grasping meaning is fairly easy with the use of the idiom "in ruin " meaning damaged or destroyed .

2.3.4 Conjunctions

Conjunctions are linking words that connect words, word groups , sentences and even sentence groups Conjunctions are of two types subordinators and coordinator within the headlines. proper conjunction of all types tend to be ellipted:

11) ***Iraq*** , <and> ***U S A Ink security pact***

Notably the conjunction has been replaced by the comma. Another example is the zero conjunction that:

12)<The**>*Labor*** <is that>***Unlikely to Scrap*** <the>***Bomb***

The zero "that " , the main verb in addition to the determiner are all left out.

Rodriguez (1996:249) avers that omitting the zero relative that is motivated not only by space restriction but also for the sake of simplicity.

All the previously mentioned ellipted elements belong to structural ellipsis. Yet Jenkins (1987: 351) adds other elements they are :

2.3.5 Verb of saying :

"The generic term say " as described by Jenkins (ibid) is frequently ellipted along with other terms likes *urge* , *suggest* , *ask* which are the main verb of saying in headlines :

13) ***Obama*** : <says> ***Iran*** <Is> ***an Arrogant power***

2.3.6 Verbs:

Verbs, here refer to all verbs other than copulas and verbs of saying . Verbs which are tend to be omitted in headlines often expressing the meaning of *involve in* , *take part in*, *occur*, *exist* and the like . The omitted verb can't be inferred precisely since several alternatives can be introduced:

14***) Shultz in Talks*** <witnessed / inspired / suggested <a> ***Demo***

15) <The> ***Soviets*** <Launched > ***in a new attack***

The verb here is left out so to avoid saying they (the Soviets) launch the attack . (Jenkins , 1987: 358)

To Jenkins's list we can add :

2.3.7 Subjects

Generally, subject's omission can occur if the context of situation linguistic or non-linguistic is clear enough.

Subject ellipsis in headlines is found as claimed by Vandenbergen (1981,cited in Chi-ouch in and Ktson , 2000 :169) in heading of the news stories concerning crime and accidents , hence subject identification is not of great importance to the readers .

16) <He has been> ***Jailed for Offending the Queen***

However Chi- on chin and Ktson (ibid) object this generalization, claiming that subject ellipsis is a matter of recoverability .e.g.

17)<The Government > ***Promotes the Civil Servant s Retirement System cooperatively***

According to them, by reading the above headline the reader can easily infer that the omitted subject is the government or any related departments under it . This inference is based on the fact that only such organization can implement the retirement system.

2.4 Intertexuality

Fairclough(quoted in O'Keeffe,2006:27)defines intertexuality as "the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate contradict, ironically echo and so forth" He also adds that intertextual features highlight "the historicity of the text".

Reah(1998:18), on the hand, stresses the presence of intertextual markers in headlinese .Frequantly,as she points out, the headline writers employs a range of words and expressions that are culturally - specific and can't be understood without reference to other texts like: proverbs ,sayings, book titles, songs and even shops' names ,Shams(2002:12) adds e.g.:

18)***Babe in Wood Found Safe***

Here the reference is to a famous folk tale "Babes in the Wood" (Reah,1998:18)

19)***Boys Are Us!***

While in this headline a reference has been made to a well- known toyshop "toys are us " . (Shams , 2002: 12)

20) ***Wine Merchants Brace for Grapes of wrath***

The reference here is to an outstanding literary work that is the novel "Grapes of wrath "

Interestingly , with such headlines , the readers has to rely on his knowledge about specific culture and the society to which it belongs , not on the article to access successful under standing . (Develotte and Rechniewski , 2000 : 4)

2.4 Abbreviations

In their attempt to display "the Kernel of news " in a comparatively little space , journalists , as Jenkins (1987: 349) avers , regularly rely on the use of abbreviations particularly, acronyms – words which are formed with the initial letters of a set of words . (Arnold, 1996: 155)

Shams (2002:9) , on the other hand , thinks that using abbreviations ,namely acronyms,is not only for space saving , rather it merits gaining special effect on the readers . For example :

21) ***Lib – Lab Pact Rallies Survive***

Conversely , Muhammad (2003:60) believes that using such economy device in headlines , is somewhat problematic ,since it may case a difficulty in understanding , especially when unfamiliar ones are utilized , like :

A AUP(American association of university professors)

22) ***AAUP to Name New chairman***

To be on the safe side , she (ibid) advises that only well – known abbreviations and acronyms should be found in headlines .

23) ***I M F to Grant loan to UAE***

(Shams , 2002 : 9)

2.5 Punctuation

Punctuation , as well have to obey the economy rules of headlines , this entails violating their normal use in other written registers . Headlinese employs "place saving "punctuation only, as claimed by Shams (2002 : 10)

The occurrence of comma , for example , is bound by replacing “and” in headlines .e.g.

24) ***Tehran ,Ankara Ink security Bact***

Similarly a “colon” is used instead of “say”

25) ***Bush : Iran*** *<is>* ***a Terrorist power***

Economy of space , is also the reason behind using a single quotes not the double ones :

26) ***Europe at ‘crisis*** ‘

Bradley Testifies

(Mahammed, 2005: 55)

2.6 Sound devices

Headlines is a written language that infrequently read a land . yet a set of sound devices are employed to produce a memorable and effective headlines . They are :

1 – Rhyme ; which means using words that end with identical sound . e.g.:

27) ***John the kew for the Bloom with A phew***

2 – Alliteration : refers to a set of words that have the same initial consonant

28) ***Wales , wheat woes***

2.7 Ambiguity

To start , “uncertainty of meaning “ and fogginess of expression “ are the ordinary meaning of the term ambiguity . More literally ,as Peters (2004: 33) says : “ambiguity means the capacity for duel interpretation – an expression which leaves the reader swinging between two possible reading "

Recently , ambiguity – in all its guises – has been much more extensively utilized in all written genres , namely headlines and advertisements . Where double interpretation are expected to be given by the reader , who either hesitates between the two or combines them to arrive at a richer composite meaning . This ,in turn , will create an amazing or even humorous reading (Lyons, 1981: 202-3).

Linguistically speaking , ambiguity is a tripartite division :

2.7.1 Lexical ambiguity : which refers to the expressions that have the same spelling and pronunciation , but different meanings (Brinton , 2000 : 32; Predelli , 2005 : 14).

Since, headlines are lexically dense type of texts they are fruitful source of lexical ambiguity . Three types of lexical ambiguity can be observed in headlines :

A. Noun ambiguity

Certainly , the massive use of nouns in headlines triggers ambiguity ,as noted by Halliday (2003:56) .e.g.

29) ***Men Recommended more Clubs for wives***

Duel reading can be assigned to the above example activated by the two different reading of the noun “Clubs “ , which can be either “a group of people regularly met for certain activity , sport etc . Or a heavy stick used a weapon which entails that male recommended that wives should be beaten . Doubtlessly , the first reading is intended not the second (Bucaria , 2006:288).

B. Verb ambiguity

Using ambiguous verbs, will assign the opposite meaning to the headline . Consider the following headline :

30***) 20 – years friendship Ends at Alter***

“Ends” can be understood as (a) to have its natural conclusion “ . Thus a headlines will be about a couple who determine to get married after being friends for a long period. (b) it can be interpreted as “to cease completely “so that headline is describing how a good friendship destroyed by a wedding .

Phrasal verbs , as well can trigger ambiguity often with humorous meaning, as claimed by Bucaria (ibid:289)

31) ***Red Tape Holds Up Bridge***

Actually, the ambiguity in the above headline is not only the result of using the phrasal verb “hold up” which can be either “prop up “ or “detain” Rather’ Red tape ‘ is the other source . ‘Red tape’ can be interpreted literally , so the headline will be a red tape is preventing abridge from falling down which is ,of course , funny interpretation . Or it can be interpreted metaphorically to mean : a bridge

construction is slowed down by bureaucracy . Apparently , the latter is the author's in tended meaning .

C. Preposition ambiguity

This type is less common than the previous two . Consider the following example :

32) ***A Stolen Painting Found by Tree***

Dwelling on the two different meanings of the preposition "*by*" . Two readings exist . First "*by*" preposition expressing' *agency'*, so a tree is performing the action of finding and this can not be the intended meaning :rather it is the humorous one .Second "*by*" a preposition with *spatial* meaning . Thus the headline meaning will be : a stolen painting found near a tree . (ibid : 290)

2.7.2 Syntactic ambiguity or grammatical ambiguity as named by Ullman (156:1977) is attributed to the grammatical factors not to the lexical ones This type is generated by (a) the ambiguity of grammatical form(b) or by the multi –reading of the grammatical structure (ibid)

Syntactic ambiguity found in headlines can be divided into :

A. Class ambiguity :a type which is mainly motivated by the elliptical nature of headlines , that renders deciding the grammatical category of the headline words a challenging task . It also creates what is Bryson(2002 : 34) terms *two – faced* headline .e.g.

33) ***Mistrust Wounds***

Different grammatical classes can be assigned to each word in the above headline. As a consequence the headline will be paraphrasable into two different ways . First , "mistrust " can be a noun, whereas "wounds" as a verb with ellipted object . So , the headlines will read :suspicion hurts (people) . Second , "mistrust" will be a verb with hurt" as a plural noun . Thus the reading will be (we should) mistrust injuries . Again , we can assume that the headlines has an ellipted subject plus auxiliary (Kroeger ,2005: 28)

B. Attachment ambiguity : which is associated with phrasal and clausal modification . Hence such clause or phrase can be attached to one or another element in the sentence. For instance :

34) ***New Housing for Elderly Not Yet Dead***

Here , the ambiguous reading stems from the attachment of the reduced relative clause “not yet dead” . It can be seen as a modifier “new housing “ which is presumably the correct interpretation for the above headline that means: *a proposal for new housing for elderly people has not yet been turned down* . In contrast with the other unserious meaning caused by attaching the clause to “for elderly ,with a headlines saying : *new housing is suggested for elderly people who are not dead yet* . Obviously , the primary source for this ambiguous attachment is geared by ellipsis the copula*: New housing for elderly <is> not yet dead*, hence its presence can eliminate such foggy attachment . (Bucaria ,2006 : 294)

2.8.3 Phonological ambiguity

This category of ambiguity is rarely found in this type of written register . In spite of the fact that headlinese employs a range of phonological devices like rhyme and alliteration . For example:

35) ***Dr Spuhler will Maintain Swiss role***

Evidently, such ambiguity can not be maintained unless the headlines is read aloud . Ambiguity, here is triggered by *Swiss role* and its homephone “*Swiss role*” (a thin cake rolled with jam) . Thus, apolitical news is headlines by a joke . (Reah , 1998: 17 -18)

2.8 The Use of Tense

Deviant , as it is, the language of headlines employs tenses in away that violates the rules of core grammar . The dominant tense form is , the simple present , no matter a present or past event is being described in the headline:

36) ***Bush Ends Steel Tariffs*** (……..ended …………)

Moreover ,simple present is also used instead of perfect or progressive forms :

37) ***Blind Girl Climbs Everest*** (……has climbed……..)

38) ***Students Fight for Course change*** (…….are fighting ……..)

Indicating change is a achieved by using present participle , but with ellipted auxiliary :

39) ***Election Date Approaching*** (……….is approaching)

(Swan , 2009: 24)

Past participle , on the other hand , appears only with passive voice . Again with omitted auxiliary:

40) ***Man Killed in Accident*** (………has been killed……)

While expressing future happenings , requires an on infinitive only :

41)***Mayor to open shopping Mall*** (……….is going to open …….)

(Beare , 2012: 1)

2.9 Word order

Another idiosyncrasy of headlinese , is its creative play with word order.e.g.

42) ***Britain Getting Warmer , say scientist*** .

Since word order is highly effective , headlinese tends to put most important elements first .

(Develotte and Rechnicwski , 2000 :5)

Conclusion

Having listed the most notable features of headlinese, we can easily infer that this particular language is more different than similar to the standard one. It violates a great deal the standard rules and breaks up all the regularities in order to achieve special effect, to produce a memorable headlines and above all to deliver the intended message in a comparatively little space.

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